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review essay

The emotional self

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Emotional geographies. Edited by Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi and Mick Smith. Ashgate. 2005. 258 pp. £45 cloth. ISBN 0 7546 4375 1.

The transmission of affect. By Teresa Brennan. Cornell University Press. 2004. 227 pp. \$19.95 paper. ISBN 0 8014 8862 1.

The cultural politics of emotion. By Sara Ahmed. Edinburgh University Press. 2004. 224 pp. £16.99 paper. ISBN 0 7486 1847 3.

Never has the study of emotions appeared so, well, emotive. At least, that was my response to reading the introduction to a new volume of essays, *Emotional geographies*, in which geographers are condemned for having ‘trouble expressing feelings’, their discipline perhaps an ‘emotionally barren terrain, a world devoid of passion, spaces ordered solely by rational principles and demarcated according to political, economic or technical logics’.¹ This condemnation may seem rather extreme – not all geographers will recognise their own work as falling into such a category. Nonetheless, such a state of affairs is being corrected, it seems, by geography’s current emotional ‘turn’. This move to focus on emotion appears to be an outgrowth of a number of well-established ideas and practices: humanism, phenomenology, performativity, feminism, psychoanalysis, non-representational theory, to name some obvious signposts. It is interesting to note that these geographers are not alone. Outside the discipline an agenda has been set through, for example, interest in exploring emotional language in public life or models of personal development. This might in part explain why two important cultural theorists – Teresa Brennan and Sara Ahmed – have also recently waded into the emotion fray, and their fascinating works are reviewed here. These different interventions on emotion, for me, beg these questions in particular: How best do we conceptualize the self in cultural work? And are emotional selves always ‘socially’ configured: will this work herald the final end to interest in ‘interior’ or private experience?

The first challenge in putting emotions centre stage is how they are to be described. A problem for readers is delineating ‘emotion’ from ‘affect’, given that Brennan uses the

latter, Ahmed and the editors of *Emotional geographies* (as is explicit from the title, although vaguely defined), the former. However, some of the contributors to *Emotional geographies* also prefer to use the word 'affect', dismissing 'emotion' as too individualistic. They utilise Deleuze's description of 'intersubjective fields of affective intensity that emerge between individuals'.² This shift in focus onto 'affect' reflects other geographical interventions.³ In a recent commentary, however, such a move is antagonistically deemed by Deborah Thein as 'masculinist, technocratic and distancing'.⁴ Elsewhere, Eric Shouse clarifies: 'Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal'.⁵ An affect, he explains, is a 'non-conscious experience of intensity' which cannot be fully realized in language, and, unlike emotions and feelings, is 'unformed and unstructured'.⁶ Whichever way they are to be distinguished, emotions and affects need to be positioned within the periodical table of their other close affinities – thoughts and sensations – and this becomes complex work, with both Ahmed and Brennan suggesting that these cannot easily be separated. For Brennan, affects are physiological shifts 'accompanying a judgement'.⁷ Drawing on a legacy emphasizing bodily changes as indicative of affects, she argues against a tendency towards a 'reductionism in understanding them'.⁸ For Ahmed, whether something feels good or bad 'already involves a process of reading, in the very attribution of significance';⁹ and contact with an object generates feeling, so emotion and sensation are also closely connected. Ahmed prefers the word 'impression' because it allows her to 'avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be "experienced" as distinct realms of human "experience"'.¹⁰

All three books are steered by different motivations, but there are clear points of contact. First, all these writers wish to reclaim emotion or affect for academic study. The editors of *Emotional geographies* believe that geographers have sidelined emotions because they are difficult to deal with. Ahmed points out how emotion has been 'viewed as "beneath" the faculties of thought and reason', adding: 'Feminist philosophers have shown us how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body'.¹¹ Brennan is interested in how affects are 'transmitted' between people. Because no one is quite sure how this happens there is a reluctance to acknowledge that it actually does. Once 'common knowledge', this concept of transmission 'faded from the history of scientific explanation'.¹² These writers describe emotions in relation to bodies (Brennan); the interplay between bodies and texts (Ahmed); and between bodies and places (contributors to *Emotional geographies*). Ahmed describes the way sensual experiences allow us to 'have a sense of our skin as bodily surface',¹³ whilst Brennan is interested in how affects change the body at a deep physical level. These different approaches pose a question: where should we 'look' for emotions or affects, or how best do we subject them to analysis? For Brennan, the key question is to figure out *how* affects work, which leads to an engagement in the intersection between biology and culture. She argues that affects come 'via an interaction with other people and an environment. But they have a physiological impact'.¹⁴ Transmission, then, is social in origin but is responsible for bodily changes: 'some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room's atmosphere, some

longer ... [Transmission] alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The "atmosphere" literally gets into the individual.¹⁵ Brennan perhaps romanticizes the 'other cultures and times' where there are 'different, more permeable, ways of being'.¹⁶ And her take on the 'environment' is social rather than place-specific: beyond noting that visitors to New York or Delhi talk about feelings of 'energy' or 'peace',¹⁷ she stops short at further analysis. Given Brennan's untimely death during the book's completion, her ideas will have to be extended by others. But her work is useful for those looking beyond the visual, as she focuses on how other senses, especially smell, are at play. For Ahmed, in contrast, the task is to describe what emotions *do* as they circulate and shape social life. Her model modifies ideas from Marx and Freud to track how emotions 'circulate between bodies': she coins the term 'affective economies' and the notion of the 'sociality' of emotions.¹⁸ Her task is to track how 'words for feelings, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects'.¹⁹ Emotions – which for Ahmed are always witnessed – 'produce the ... surfaces ... that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects',²⁰ and the work of emotion 'involves the "sticking" of signs to bodies: for example, when others become "hateful", then actions of "hate" are directed against them'.²¹

Following this, a second point of contact uniting these books – and a standard move in recent cultural work on emotion – is a concern to go beyond, as Ahmed puts it, an 'assumption of interiority',²² to place emotions in social or political context. For Brennan, denying transmission creates a particular understanding of individual identity based on 'forming "boundaries" by projection'.²³ The self-contained Western identity has to be constructed, and this 'depends on projecting outside of ourselves unwanted affects such as anxiety and depression in a process commonly known as "othering"'. There is just 'too much affective stuff to dispose of, too much that is directed away from the self with no place to go'.²⁴ The increase of affects 'makes the Western individual especially more concerned with securing a private fortress, personal boundaries, against the unsolicited emotional intrusions of the other'.²⁵ In contrast, Ahmed questions the assumption that we have feelings which 'then move outwards towards objects and others'.²⁶ Rather, emotions 'should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices'.²⁷ Ahmed's concern is to understand why power relations endure despite forms of resistance, and the way emotions are embroiled in social injustice, especially racism and homophobia. There is a need, she argues, to 'respond to injustice in a way that shows rather than erases the complexity of the relation between violence, power and emotion'.²⁸ Similarly, the editors of *Emotional geographies* attempt to position emotion work as maintaining geography's 'critical edge', emulating the work of Sibley, who argued that 'attending to feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, envy and hatred is essential if we are to understand the insidious power and tenacity of racism'.²⁹ Studying emotion, then, 'offers a promising avenue through which to advance understandings of dynamic geographies of difference, exclusion and oppression'. But their manifesto is wider, including work on 'connection, pleasure, desire, love and attachment'.³⁰ Thus, emotional geographies are offered two directions – one examining relationships of power, and one emphasizing a more positive receptivity. This breadth of scope is useful

because it avoids emotion work being enlisted purely for a narrow political project. It raises a question, however, about the different ways emotion is formulated as 'critical' and 'social'.

The relational self

A further move is implied by this work: all three books emphasize the 'relational' nature of emotion. As Davidson, Bondi and Smith put it: 'We argue for a non-objectifying view of emotions as relational flows, fluxes and currents, in-between people and places rather than "things" or "objects" to be studied or measured'.³¹ For Ahmed, emotions 'create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place ... the "I" and the "we" are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others'.³² In a similar vein, the editors of *Emotional geographies* argue that emotions 'help to construct, maintain as well as sometimes to disrupt the very distinction between bodily interiors and exteriors'.³³ Relationality appears to grow out of a concern to distance emotion work from humanism, and ideas about the nature of the individual this assumes. For Ahmed, the 'personal is complicated, and mediated by relations that make any person embody more than the personal, and the personal embody more than the person'.³⁴ But how we feel sensations might be tied to a 'past history of readings, in the sense that the process of recognition ... is bound up with what we already know'.³⁵ Brennan is more explicit about this. A person's 'particular emotional experience' is relevant, she writes, because we might 'influence the registration of the transmitted affect in a variety of ways ... Even if I am picking up on your affect, the linguistic and visual content, meaning the thoughts I attach to that affect, remain my own; they remain the particular historical conjunction of words and experiences I represent'.³⁶ In his contribution to *Emotional geographies*, Owain Jones also points to the 'stunningly complex' interplay between different processes, including memory. Emotions are 'systemic and interact constantly with our conscious and unconscious selves, memories and environment'.³⁷

Some contributors to *Emotional geographies* concentrate on allowing research subjects' voices to be heard, assuming emotions to be both 'individually experienced' as well as 'shared'.³⁸ There is a tension between exploring the embodied and intimate practices of emotion – placing a spotlight on individual selves and bodies – and a desire to transcend individualism without becoming too abstracted from situated experience.³⁹ This tension is negotiated in different ways. In part, it is played out as one between emotions' relationship to intimacy and distance. For John Urry, for example, the 'pleasures' of place are derived from emotions involved in its visual consumption. All these emotions, he concludes, are 'judgements from afar, abstract and mobile'.⁴⁰ But many contributors focus on emotion's suggestion of intimacy. A growing interest in therapeutic models raises a question about how far some emotion work might uncritically take up aspects of self-help culture, and thus reinforce a form of individualism. Thien, however, questions an assumption that intimacy is the 'coming together of selves that are constant, stable, self-enclosed',⁴¹ and argues that 'distance

and proximity can co-exist and may be configured in complex ways as we engage in our lives'.⁴²

In their contributions to *Emotional geographies*, both Conradson and Paterson prefer to use the word 'affect', as discussed above. Paterson utilises Deleuze's notion of the body as a series of intensities for his essay on therapeutic touch, which opens up a 'non-verbal communicative pathway or channel between bodies'.⁴³ But he also highlights Spinoza's resolution of the mind/body dualism which allows the 'feminist reclamation of the situated, concrete particularity of the body'.⁴⁴ He reconciles these two approaches by emphasizing that the body's 'particularity is ... not limited, but mutable'.⁴⁵ In his study of experiences of a rural respite care centre in Dorset, Conradson asks how we might conceptualize the 'felt dimensions of encounters with place',⁴⁶ and how certain places 'shape a person's subjectivity'.⁴⁷ Like others, he maintains a notion of the self as a 'malleable and somewhat porous entity, able to be affected by others',⁴⁸ but acknowledges that this could lead to a form of social constructionism where the person 'becomes merely an effect of external discourses and practices'. At this point, he manoeuvres towards a different notion of the self, from psychotherapy, which allows it 'a degree of centring and consistency within the relations that shape it'.⁴⁹ Whether this 'core' of the self is biological, psychological or spiritual, he does not know. But the point is that the self becomes a 'somewhat centred entity that emerges through a reflexive and relational interplay with other people and events'.⁵⁰

Other contributors focus on the social nature of emotion. These writers contribute to the question of how far the immaterial aspects of cultural life – such as its emotional content – can be represented. Hubbard, for example, in his study of emotions in the evening economy, simply argues that as emotions are 'felt and sensed reactions' that 'arise in the midst of the (inter)corporal exchange between self and world',⁵¹ they can be made knowable through language. This does not require a return to humanism, he stresses, but an extension of material culture to 'encompass the emotions'.⁵² Elsewhere, Parr, Philo and Burns use their study of emotional restraint in the experiences of people with mental health problems living in the remote Scottish Highlands to argue for a description of emotional selves which are geographically located. An understanding of how constraint is 'collectively produced and experienced' can be grasped through scrutinizing the 'distinctive regional norms, expectations and cultures of emotional sociality'.⁵³ Nigel Thrift's non-representational theory suggests that words cannot adequately represent interior states. But it is possible to think of 'different peoples in different places being more or less successful in their attempts to convey emotional states using ordinary language'.⁵⁴ In this way, the 'unsayability' of emotions can be traced to the 'workings of local power relations', rather than 'some distant philosophical impasse'. They call for an emotional geography of 'everyday emotional terrains, regions, places', which must 'listen to what situated individuals within these places do manage consciously to "say" about what they think is occurring'.⁵⁵

All these contributors, then, suggest the diversity of cultural work on emotions – the title *Emotional geographies* is self-consciously rendered in the plural – as well as its potential to crystallize some important theoretical debates. The writers in the books

reviewed offer different approaches that might form the basis of future exploration. But they also raise important issues. For example, does the focus on relationality allow us to transcend the age-old binary between society and self, or self and other? Are such tensions reworked or retained? And how far can a focus on emotion help mediate between texts and bodies, the visual and the non-visual? This work also raises fascinating questions about the nature of the emotional self. By emphasizing that it is not just our thoughts but also emotions and affects that are not our 'own', there is a risk that this reinforces a sense of passivity; but it does reframe the question of how far individual resistance is possible. It also suggests that the space for 'interior' experience – including religious, spiritual or intangible kinds of events, privately felt – is becoming, in cultural terms, narrower. Ahmed, for example, attempts to circumvent binaries such as 'interior' and 'exterior', but by doing so perhaps overplays the importance of surfaces and plays down the complexity and singularity of our biographies and biologies. She cannot imagine the experience of sensations such as pain in isolation from others. But people continue to have, and to be shaped by, private experiences, or by events or affects to which they ascribe personal meanings; and, as most writers concede, the way these are accumulated, expressed and described through a lifetime create a complex distinctiveness. The emotional self may be socially responsive, even socially created, but remnants of individuality remain.

Lastly, this review begs the question: where best should we focus future research on emotional geographies, and what is distinctive about it? How far, for example, should the study of emotions fixate on extremes – intensities, passions, intimacies? What about the so-called mundane, ambiguous or subtle emotions? What about beliefs? Equally, does the emotional 'turn' in geography bring together existing work already deemed to have an 'emotional' content? A number of the essays in *Emotional geographies* assume such a central role for emotions because of the type of enquiry undertaken – people's responses to bodies in different contexts, including geographies of sexuality, illness, therapies and old age. What would it mean to place emotion more centrally within a wider focus of enquiry? These and other questions raised by the books highlight the complexity and challenges inherent in offering emotions and affects a greater place within cultural work.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

¹ L. Bondi, J. Davidson and M. Smith, 'Introduction: geography's "emotional turn"', in *Emotional geographies* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005) [henceforth *EG*], p. 1.

² D. Conradson, 'Freedom, space and perspective: moving encounters with other ecologies', *EG* p. 107.

- ³ See e.g. N. Thrift, 'Intensities of feeling: towards a spatial politics of affect', *Geografiska Annaler* 86B (2004).
- ⁴ D. Thien, 'After or beyond feeling? A consideration of affect and emotion in geography', *Area* 37 (2005), p. 452.
- ⁵ E. Shouse, 'Feeling, emotion, affect', *M/C journal: a journal of media and culture* 8 (2005), www.media-culture.org.au/, p. 1.
- ⁶ *Ibid.* p. 3.
- ⁷ T. Brennan, *The transmission of affect* (New York, Cornell University Press, 2004), [henceforth *TA*], p. 5.
- ⁸ *TA* p. 7.
- ⁹ S. Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004), [henceforth *CPE*], p. 6.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *CPE* p. 3.
- ¹² *TA* p. 2.
- ¹³ *CPE* p. 24.
- ¹⁴ *TA* p. 3.
- ¹⁵ *TA* p. 1.
- ¹⁶ *TA* p. 11.
- ¹⁷ *TA* p. 8.
- ¹⁸ *CPE* p. 8.
- ¹⁹ *CPE* p. 14.
- ²⁰ *CPE* p. 10.
- ²¹ *CPE* p. 13.
- ²² *CPE* p. 8.
- ²³ *TA* p. 12.
- ²⁴ *TA* p. 15.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *CPE* p. 9.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *CPE* p. 196.
- ²⁹ Bondi *et al.*, 'Introduction', *EG* p. 7.
- ³⁰ *EG* p. 8.
- ³¹ *EG* p. 3.
- ³² *CPE* p. 10.
- ³³ Bondi *et al.*, 'Introduction', *EG* p. 7.
- ³⁴ *CPE* p. 168.
- ³⁵ *CPE* p. 25.
- ³⁶ *TA* p. 7.
- ³⁷ O. Jones, 'An ecology of emotion, memory, self and landscape', *EG* p. 205.
- ³⁸ C. Milligan, A. Bingley and A. Gatrell, 'Healing and feeling: the place of emotions in later life', *EG* p. 58.
- ³⁹ For further discussion, see L. Bondi, 'Making connections and thinking through emotions: between geography and psychotherapy', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, n.s. 30 (2005).
- ⁴⁰ J. Urry, 'The place of emotions within place', *EG* p. 82.
- ⁴¹ D. Thien, 'Intimate distances: considering questions of "Us"', *EG* p. 201.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*

- ⁴³ M. Paterson, 'Affecting touch: towards a "felt" phenomenology of therapeutic touch', *EG* p. 162.
- ⁴⁴ *EG* p. 163.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ D. Conradson, 'Freedom, space and perspective: moving encounters with other ecologies', *EG* p. 103.
- ⁴⁷ *EG* p. 104.
- ⁴⁸ *EG* p. 105.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (emphasis original).
- ⁵⁰ *EG* pp. 105–6.
- ⁵¹ P. Hubbard, 'The geographies of "Going Out": emotion and embodiment in the evening economy', *EG* p. 121.
- ⁵² *EG* p. 132.
- ⁵³ H. Parr, C. Philo and N. Burns, "'Not a display of emotions": emotional geographies in the Scottish Highlands', *EG* p. 96.
- ⁵⁴ *EG* p. 98.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*